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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001185

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SUBJECT: ROHINGYA REFUGEES AND REBELS - A VIEW FROM OUTSIDE

REF: A. USDAO DHAKA 251020Z SEP 05

[1](#)B. USDAO DHAKA 290208Z SEP 05

[1](#)C. DHAKA 3417

Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Rangoon Poloff traveled to Bangladesh in mid September to visit Rohingya refugee camps and to meet agencies that assist the refugees. Despite living in refugee camps for over a decade amid squalid conditions and sometimes suffering violence and intimidation, very few refugees indicate interest in returning to Burma and the repressive conditions they fled in the early 1990s. Recent discoveries of cached weapons near the border with Burma appear to be old stocks left over from failed insurgencies and not an indication of renewed rebel activity against the GOB or the Bangladesh government (BDG). END SUMMARY.

INHOSPITABLE REFUGEE CAMPS

[1](#)2. (C) Rangoon Poloff and Political Specialist visited Bangladesh in mid September. Following briefings in Dhaka by IOM, UNHCR and others they traveled with Embassy Dhaka Poloffs to Cox's Bazaar to visit two official Rohingya refugee camps (Naya Para and Kutu Palong) and another unofficial "makeshift" camp. UNHCR works with the Bangladesh Red Crescent and the BDG to provide minimal necessities to the refugees in the official camps where conditions are purposely kept spartan, as the BDG does not want the refugees to "feel at home" and settle down forever. The Bangladesh police control the refugees by giving selected refugees some authority over the others. Called "majhis," these refugees frequently rule like the mafia by extorting money and beating refugees into submission.

[1](#)3. (C) The Bangladeshi camp commander denied Poloffs access to Kutu Palong camp due to a visit by a European ambassador earlier in the year resulting in a riot that the Bangladeshi authorities brutally suppressed, killing at least three refugees and wounding many others. Nevertheless, we managed to meet several refugees at the camp entrance and heard their testimonies.

A HOMESTEAD IN HELL

[1](#)4. (C) The visit to the unofficial "makeshift" camp near the town of Teknaf was sobering (ref C). The BDG refuses to acknowledge the inhabitants' refugee status. Some of the Rohingyas who live there are displaced refugees from an older Rohingya "makeshift" community in Teknaf town, while others appear to be recent arrivals from northern Rakhine State in Burma. They live in a cramped, extremely unhygienic settlement sandwiched between the Naf River and the highway and eke out a living as day laborers in Teknaf (opposite Maung Daw, Rakhine State). Some prostitution is said to exist in this unofficial camp. Malnourished children were in evidence. The BDG reportedly asked these settlers to move to a different location, but the Rohingya say if they are not close to Teknaf, they will have no means of earning a living and then the BDG must take responsibility for their needs.

REFUGEES: THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

[1](#)5. (C) The BDG says that 20,697 Rohingya refugees lived in the two official refugee camps at the end of August. UNHCR in Cox's Bazaar estimates that the figure is closer to 22,000. Although UNHCR is not allowed to operate in the "makeshift" camp, it estimates that there are close to 7,000 refugees living there. UNHCR further estimates there are 100,000 to 200,000 Rohingya migrants from Burma who have quietly integrated into the community around Cox's Bazaar in recent years. Some of them have been able to obtain Bangladeshi passports, are registered to vote, and some travel to Persian Gulf countries for employment -- rights that do not exist for them in Burma. UNHCR estimates that approximately 90% of these settlers are former Rohingya refugees who were repatriated to Burma in the mid 1990s, then through "reverse movement" returned to Bangladesh, but this time carefully avoided the refugee camps.

[1](#)6. (C) UNHCR in Rangoon admits that it lacks the resources to continuously monitor 236,000 Rohingya returnees in northern Rakhine State eleven years after repatriation, and primarily focuses its attention on "new returnees," monitoring them for

three months after they return and only follow up further if problems develop. Therefore, it is entirely possible that some of the 236,000 Rohingya refugees who were repatriated to Rakhine State in the mid 1990s have managed to slip back into Bangladesh.

GUNS AND REBELS

17. (C) We spoke to journalists about recent arms caches that the BDG unearthed in Naikhongchhari, a forested district along the Burma-Bangladesh border (ref A and B). They believe that Rohingya insurgents such as the National United Party of Arakan (NUPA), the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), the Arakan-Rohingya National Organization (ARNO), and perhaps other splinter groups buried these weapons years ago. As little hope remained of rejuvenating their armed struggle, according to the journalists, some opportunists decided to earn money by selling the old arms to criminal groups. Some were caught trying to sell the arms, and in return for leniency, they revealed the locations of other arms caches to the BDG. The sources claimed that the leadership of the RSO and ARNO has moved on to the Middle East and their organizations are no longer viable. While the sources said that international terrorists might try to infiltrate the Rohingya camps by sea and foment trouble, they considered this scenario unlikely.

COMMENT: NO TURNING BACK

18. (C) The Bangladesh Red Crescent reported that only 92 Rohingya refugees chose repatriation to Burma this year, as compared to 3,233 in 2003. The refugees who chose to remain in Bangladesh listed many reasons why they originally left Burma, including refusal by the authorities to grant marriage licenses and to register their newborns, confiscation of their traditional land, the inability to leave their villages to trade, and the discriminatory and often brutal treatment inflicted on them by the Burmese military and local authorities. The refugees' preference to remain in their hellhole camps in Bangladesh, rather than return to Burma, suggests just how bad conditions remain in northern Rakhine State.

19. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Dhaka.
Villarosa